

FLOODS IN INDIA, PAKISTAN

Toll tops 230

AFP, Srinagar

More than 230 people in Pakistan and northern India have been killed in torrential monsoon rains which triggered flooding, landslides and house collapses, officials in the two countries said yesterday.

Troops and other emergency personnel were deployed in both countries to help with relief operations, with boats and helicopters being used to reach stranded people.

Incessant rains in Pakistan have killed at least 106 people over the past three days and damaged thousands of houses, officials said as authorities put 4 districts on red alert for floods.

And in neighbouring India, torrential rains and flooding have left at least 128 people dead and marooned thousands more, according to officials.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif chaired a high-level review meeting yesterday and ordered acceleration of relief and rescue efforts in the country, his office said.

In worst-hit Punjab province, the death toll from rains and flooding over the past three days hit 55 while 235 people were injured, rescue services director general Rizwan Naseer, told AFP.

Another 48 people have died in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, sources said..

Hardest hit on the Indian side was Indian Kashmir where the heaviest rains and flooding in at least half a century have claimed at least 107 lives since last Tuesday.

"The floods have caused a lot of damage," Indian home affairs minister Rajnath Singh said after being driven around Kashmir's main city, Srinagar, by state chief minister Omar Abdullah.

Many key roads and the lone highway linking the Kashmir region to the Indian plains were closed, communication lines and railway services disrupted, while several bridges were washed away.

In India's Punjab state, at least 21 people died as a result of house cave-ins and landslides.



Indian residents look on from a roof as raging waters from the overflowing Tawi river inundate a Hindu Temple in Jammu, yesterday. Inset, Jammu residents look on towards threatened houses as waters from the Tawi river rage past a locality.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWSIN brief

India police arrest alleged militant

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police said they had arrested an alleged key member of a homegrown Indian Mujahideen group over a series of attacks, days after security was tightened following claims by al-Qaeda that it had launched an Indian wing. Police identified the man as Ajaz Shaikh, 27, and said in a statement that he had worked as "the logistics man" for transferring funds to the banned group.

Iran forces plane carrying Americans to land

AFP, Tehran

A charter plane carrying 100 people, including Americans, out of Afghanistan was ordered to land in southern Iran because of errors in its flight plan, a Tehran-based official said yesterday. The rare incident prompted a flurry of reaction in the United States but the problem was solved and the aircraft headed on to Dubai, its original destination, after a few hours on the ground.

MH370 search to resume in 2 weeks

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

An intensified underwater search for missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 will start in about two weeks' time, Australian premier Tony Abbott said yesterday as he visited Malaysia to discuss the issue. Abbott said the hunt for the jet, which inexplicably veered off its Kuala Lumpur-Beijing route on March 8 with 239 people aboard, would continue for as long as necessary.

3 dead after US ghost plane crashes

AFP, Washington

The US military was yesterday searching for a seven-seater Socata TBM-700 single-engine turbo prop aircraft carrying three people that crashed off the coast of Jamaica in an incident. The aircraft took off from US and flew south over Cuba and across the Caribbean on Friday, ignoring calls from air traffic control with its pilot, according to reports, unconscious in the cockpit.

Syria air raids kill 31

AFP, Beirut

Syrian air strikes in the jihadist-held northern city of Raqa yesterday killed 31 people, including 15 Islamic State (IS) members, a monitoring group said. The strikes come amid a stepped-up campaign by President Bashar al-Assad's regime targeting IS positions in north and east Syria.

Fragile ceasefire holds

EU agrees new sanctions against Russia despite Moscow warnings

AFP, Donetsk

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko yesterday said that he and Russian leader Vladimir Putin had agreed that the ceasefire between Kiev and separatist rebels was largely holding despite rival claims from rebels and Kiev of truce violations.

"The two heads of state noted (in a phone call) that the ceasefire regime was generally being observed. Petro Poroshenko and Vladimir Putin discussed ways to make the ceasefire hold," the Ukrainian president's office said in a statement, after the rebels and government forces accused the other of some truce violations.

Although the situation overall appeared to be calm, the rival claims underscore the fragility of the deal that aims to end five months of bloodshed but contains no framework for a political solution to an insurgency still threatening to tear apart Ukraine.

The 12-point pact signed in the Belarussian capital Minsk is the first backed by both the Kremlin and Kiev since bands of Russian-speaking militias seized a string of government buildings across Ukraine's industrial heartland in early April.

But with Western leaders still deeply suspicious of Russia's intentions, the US and EU have agreed to beef sanctions against Moscow, and Nato approved a rapid reaction force aimed at reassuring jittery eastern European states.

The new sanctions tighten existing measures imposed in July, targeting more individuals with travel bans and asset freezes, as well as tightening access to capital markets for Russian oil and defence companies.

US President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron on Friday said that the sanctions could be lifted if there was evidence that Russia was taking steps to solve the situation in Ukraine.

Russia warned it would react if the EU imposes more sanctions, accusing Brussels of supporting the "party of war" in Kiev.

UKRAIN CRISIS

Meanwhile, Iraq yesterday welcomed US President Barack Obama's plan for an international coalition against jihadists as a "strong message of support", after repeatedly calling for aid against the militants.

Obama outlined a plan at a Nato summit Friday for a broad coalition to defeat the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group, which led an offensive that overran chunks of five Iraqi provinces in June and also holds significant territory in neighbouring Syria.

Obama said Friday that regional involvement was "absolutely critical" for the anti-IS effort, although the State Department added there were "no plans" for military coordination with Iran in the fight after BBC reported the country's top cleric cleared way for such move.

LEAKING SECRET PAPERS TO QATAR

Egypt's Morsi charged over compromising nat'l security

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's deposed president Mohamed Morsi will be tried on charges of giving Qatar documents relating to national security, the state prosecutor said yesterday.

The Islamist former head of state already faces the death penalty in several trials, and his supporters have been the target of a deadly crackdown by the authorities since his ouster in July 2013.

No date has yet been set for the new trial for Morsi, who is suspected of providing the sensitive documents to the energy-rich Gulf state during his single year of turbulent rule.

Morsi will go on trial for having "handed over to Qatari intelligence documents linked to national security... in exchange for one million dollars", the prosecutor said in a statement.

Ten other defendants will be tried alongside Morsi, including his former secretary Amin El-Serafi and Ibrahim Mohamed

Helal, whom the prosecutor said was chief editor of the Doha-based Al-Jazeera satellite television network.

In the statement, the prosecutor said the documents supplied to Qatar were given to "top heads from Al-Jazeera".

The interior ministry in March accused Serafi of handing over documents regarding the army, its weaponry and troop deployments to an Al-Jazeera chief editor and member of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood.

The movement was designated as a terrorist group after Morsi's overthrow on July 3, 2013.

Morsi is already on trial in three separate cases -- one over the killing of protesters during his presidency, another for allegedly conspiring with foreign powers including Iran to destabilise Egypt, and a third over a jailbreak during the 2011 uprising that ousted strongman Hosni Mubarak.

Morsi could face the death penalty if convicted.



Iran hits back over UN's nuke concerns

AFP, Vienna

Iran yesterday said it never agreed to a deadline to provide answers on its controversial nuclear programme, after the UN atomic watchdog accused Tehran of failing to deliver on time.

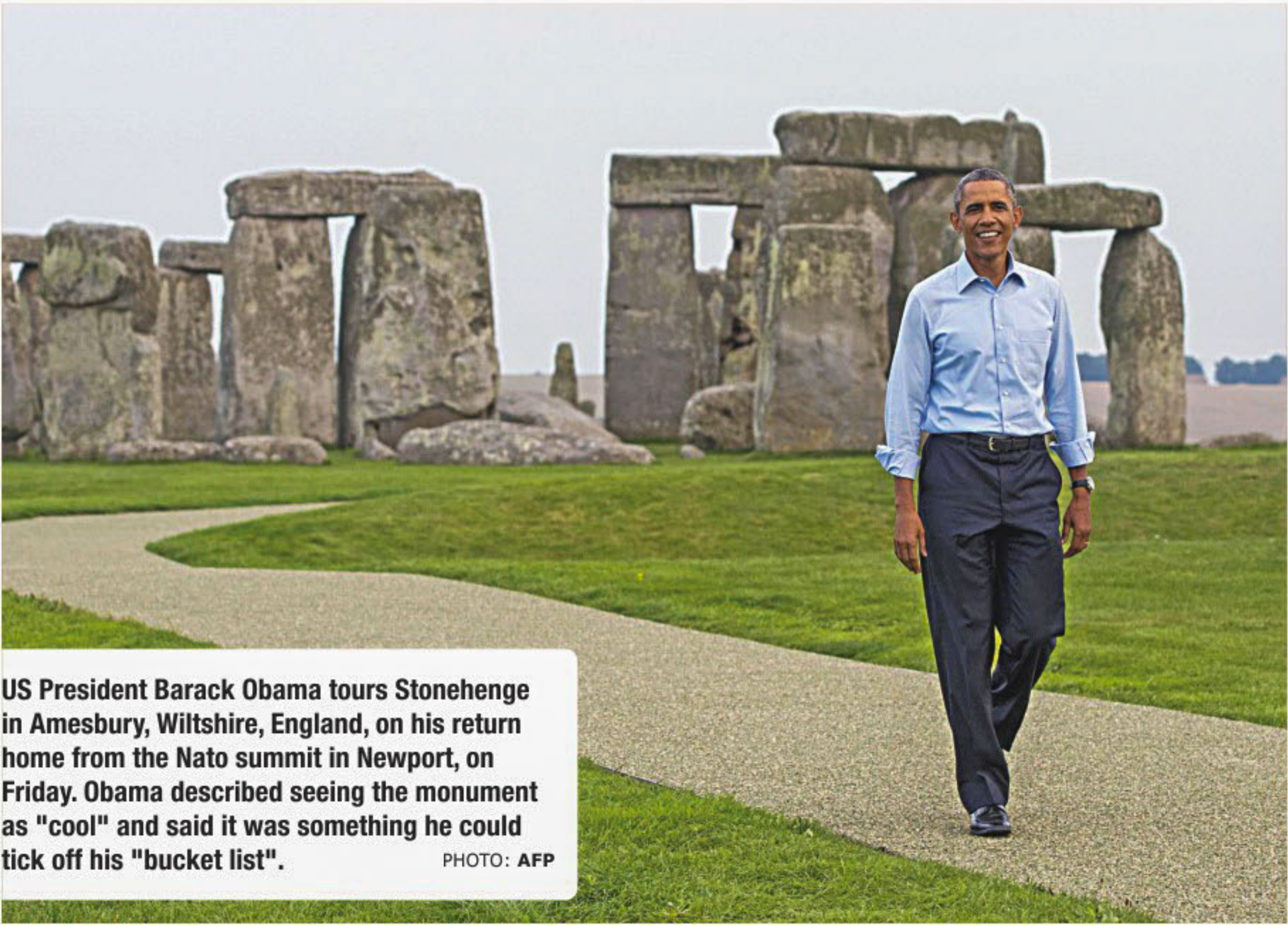
"Iran had warned the International Atomic Energy Agency that because of the complexity of the issues, implementing all five points by August 25 was not possible," said Behrouz Kamalvandi, spokesman of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, quoted by state news agency IRNA.

"The IAEA was aware of this," he said.

The Vienna-based IAEA said Friday Iran had failed to meet an August 25 deadline to provide information on five points to allay concerns it was developing nuclear weapons, something it denies.

Not answering the long-standing questions over the allegations could harm the chances of a potentially historic deal between Iran and world powers focused on Tehran's current activities. New talks between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany are due to resume in New York on September 18 ahead of a November 24 deadline.

The mooted deal, after a decade of rising tensions, would kill off fears that Iran might use its nuclear facilities -- which it says are for peaceful purposes -- to develop atomic weapons.



US President Barack Obama tours Stonehenge in Amesbury, Wiltshire, England, on his return home from the Nato summit in Newport, on Friday. Obama described seeing the monument as "cool" and said it was something he could tick off his "bucket list".

PHOTO: AFP

Sierra Leone declares Ebola lockdown

UN to set up crisis center, eyes to stem outbreak in months

AFP, Freetown

Sierra Leone is to enforce three days of "complete shutdown" across the country later this month in a bid to contain the Ebola epidemic, a government spokesman told AFP yesterday.

The measure, which will come into force from September 19, means pedestrians and vehicles on non-essential business will be barred from movement for 72 hours.

Authorities in Freetown will use the 72-hour quarantine window to give medical staff access to patients who have yet to be transferred to treatment centres, Bayratay said.

Bayratay said the shutdown would be aided by the arrival of several new ambulances and up to 30 military vehicles, and could be repeated in future.

The quarantine plan was announced after the World Health Organization

(WHO) said Friday that the death toll from Ebola since the start of the year had topped 2,000.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced on Friday that the United Nations plans to set up an Ebola crisis centre to coordinate the response to the deadly virus and to strive to halt its spread in West African countries in six to nine months.

Ban called on the international community to provide \$600 million needed for supplies in West Africa, where more than 3,500 confirmed or probable cases of the hemorrhagic fever have been reported and 2,097 people have died since March.

Countries affected by the epidemic include Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone. An outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo is unrelated to and independent of the West African epidemic, the World Health Organization has said.

Xi postpones Pakistan visit due to protests

AGENCIES

Pakistan's foreign ministry yesterday said Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit scheduled for this month had been postponed due to anti-government protests in Islamabad.

Pakistani opposition groups on Wednesday resumed talks with the government in a bid to end the political crisis rocking the country, but remained in a stalemate over demands for Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's resignation.

The fresh talks came after days of clashes between police and club-wielding anti-government protesters left three dead and hundreds injured, raising fears of an intervention by the powerful military that has ruled Pakistan for more than half its history.

The ministry said the delay was "in view of the current political situation in

Pakistan" and the trip would be rescheduled "as early as possible".

A visit from Sri Lanka's president was also cancelled last month for similar reasons.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had been hoping for about \$34bn of deals to be signed during Xi's visit, reports said. In a statement, Pakistan's foreign ministry described the two countries as "time-tested all-weather friends" and said talks were underway for a rescheduled visit.

There was no immediate comment from the Chinese side. Anti-government protesters, led by opposition politician Imran Khan and Sufi cleric Tahirul Qadri, want the government to resign. Thousands of their followers have set up camp in Islamabad's sensitive "Red Zone" government district since August 15. But their calls to overthrow the government have failed to galvanise mass support in the country of 180 million.



Hillary to decide White House run next year

AFP, Mexico City

Former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton said Friday she would likely decide whether she will join the 2016 presidential race early next year.

Hillary, who lost the Democratic presidential nomination to Barack Obama in 2008, is widely expected to make another run for the White House.

"I will be making a decision around probably after the first of the year about whether I am going to run again or not," the former first lady said in Mexico City at a forum hosted by the Telmex Foundation of Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim.

"It's a very serious undertaking, so obviously I'm thinking about it, but I have not made a decision yet," said Hillary, who has previously indicated she would not make an announcement this year.

She was speaking just as a potential rival in the 2016 election, New Jersey's Republican Governor Chris Christie, wrapped up a three-day visit to Mexico to burnish his foreign policy credentials.

Christie met Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto earlier in the week, while Hillary held talks with the Latin American leader on Friday.